

Rep. Tom Tangretti

Remarks on Volunteerism

Youngwood Railroad Museum

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Good evening, and thank you for inviting me to speak to you.

In the United States today, there seems to be a renewed interest in volunteering. The President has talked about it for almost four years now, retired Army General Colin Powell has started an organization to get youth involved in volunteerism and, as you may know, many schools across the country have begun to include some volunteer work as part of the school curriculum — some have even made it a requirement of graduation.

And while this kind of required volunteer work has sparked controversy, the idea of getting people interested and involved in volunteering at a young age is something I haven't heard anyone argue with.

So, how can we convince more people, especially young people, to volunteer?

Well, in my job, you have to spend a lot of time convincing people about a lot of different things, so believe me, getting

people's support for something is a thing that I am pretty familiar with, and have gotten pretty good at.

And one thing I've discovered is that people are much more likely to support something once they see how it will benefit them directly. ✓

Now, to many people, this seems like a crass approach to try and get people to volunteer. Volunteerism is supposed to be about charity, sacrifice and altruism, not self-benefit, isn't it?

Well, there are a lot of reasons why people volunteer, and to be sure, charity, sacrifice and altruism are some of the most important and most common.

But you will find few volunteers who, when pressed, will not admit that they themselves derive many benefits from their volunteer work. So I think focusing on this aspect of volunteerism is entirely appropriate, and that is what I would like to do tonight.

One of the best ways to think about why you should volunteer is to stop thinking about volunteerism as something you do entirely for others, and start thinking about it as an exchange.

Doing something for nothing is antithetical to most people – even the most altruistic people. But if you really think hard

about what takes place when you volunteer, it isn't a case of doing something for nothing at all. We need to think about volunteering as more of an exchange.

Because when you volunteer you do ALWAYS get something back. And what you get back usually involves the reason why you volunteered in the first place, although you may not have thought about it much.

Let's list just some of the many possible reasons for volunteering:

You might volunteer because it makes you feel needed.

Maybe you have a skill you are particularly proud of that you want to share with others.

Some people volunteer because they want to meet more people, or are new in town and want to get to know the community better.

Some people volunteer because it makes them feel like they are making a measurable commitment to something they believe in.

Others volunteer because they need to gain leadership skills, or want to be able to list something they think will look good on their resume.

Other reasons to volunteer include because you are pressured by others; you'll feel guilty if you don't; you want to be part of something; because you have a personal experience with an illness, problem or cause; or just because you want to feel good.

The point is, it doesn't matter what the original motivation is for volunteering. What matters is that once most people begin to volunteer, they continue to do so as long as they see a need and as long as they feel their efforts are accomplishing something.

That's the important thing. While people may start out volunteering to make a difference in their own lives —they always make a difference in the lives of others. And after all, the best of both worlds, isn't it?

Think about it this way: all of us, no matter who we are or what are circumstances are, will at some point in our lives be in need. Today, you may be the person with the ability to help, but tomorrow, you may be the person who needs help.

Many of you here tonight have probably already been on both sides of the volunteer cycle. You might be a tutor to someone who can't read, while a month ago the volunteer ambulance service rushed a family member of yours to the hospital. Some of you probably help yourselves directly by volunteering. If you are part of a neighborhood watch, you do. By protecting your neighbors' homes, you protect your own home, as well.

Adding your volunteer efforts to the volunteer efforts of others makes everyone's life a little bit better.

So if you need to convince yourself to volunteer, if you need to convince your neighbor, your friend, your son or daughter – go ahead and pander to the selfish side of human nature. It's a very effective method, and the service to others results is just the same.

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